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Beyond Regional Integration?
Social Constructivism, Regional Cohesiveness and the Regionalism Puzzle

LUCIANA ALEXANDRA GHICA

In this paper I deconstruct the foundations of regional integration and propose a social constructivist reconstruction of the ontological field of regionalism. More specifically, I first show that regions are notions not only of space but also of time and culture. Then, I reconstruct its related conceptual field (regionalism, regionalization, regional identity etc.), arguing that regional integration is an incomplete category of regionalism. Within this framework and as an alternative to regional integration, I build the concept of regional cohesiveness defined as the degree to which a group of actors inhabiting a contiguous space act and represent themselves as a group. This analytical model builds a multidimensional space for comprehensively mapping and exploring all forms of contemporary regionalism, from both institutional and normative/representational perspectives.

Social Constructivist Premises

Social constructivism is a relatively recent paradigm in international relations (IR) theory. It emerged in the discipline in the late 1980s mostly through the hybridization of the IR research field with various debates and topics from other disciplines, particularly under the influence of critical theories. Although there is no widely shared canon with respect to its intellectual lineage, much of the constructivist research is heavily influenced by modernist and postmodernist thinking, among which frequent references are to the work of Michel Foucault on the relations between power and knowledge and that of Jacques Derrida on text[1].

Unlike the field of IR theory, the rest of the political science spectrum still largely ignores this new theoretical perspective. However, especially in the last decade, constructivism has become one of the major approaches for the study of political phenomena that take place within the sphere of international relations. This is easily visible if one briefly reviews the editorial space and importance that constructivist research has been granted since its emergence in mainstream IR journals such as *International Organization*, *International Security* and the *European Journal of International Relations*, in prestigious IR collections of publications, such as the Cambridge Studies in International Relations, or in best-selling IR textbooks. Even if sometimes critical

[1] For seminal analyses of the sources and influences of critical theory and postmodernism thinking in social constructivism, see for instance Richard PRICE, Christian REUS-SMIT, "Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1998, pp. 259-294, as well as the contributions included in Iver B. NEUMANN, Ole WÆVER (eds.), *The Future of International Relations: Masters in the Making?*, Routledge, London, 1997.

to it, most of the recent surveys of the discipline also do not fail to treat this new perspective on international relations[1].

As most of those writing on the topic noticed, despite heavy influences and borrowings from critical social theory, constructivism addresses most of the classic themes of international relations thinking, such as anarchy, power and interest formation[2]. From these traditional research directions, the puzzle of change is particularly significant to distance itself from the mainstream perspectives in the discipline, though it provides alternative accounts for many of the other topics on the IR agenda as well[3]. On some issues, the differences between constructivism and the more mainstream theories are not so evident as they agree on several points. In this sense, (neo)liberal research, such as the work of Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane on transnational relations[4], may be regarded as a forerunner of constructivism[5]. In fact, as Ted Hopf already noticed[6], the debate on how constructivism agrees with (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism has become probably one of the most heated topics in the field of IR meta-theory. However, in this article the purpose of reviewing the features of constructivism is not to discuss its epistemological foundations but to present the premises on which I further reconstruct the vocabulary of regionalism.

The main tenet of social constructivism is that international actors, like humans, develop in a socially constructed world, hence the label. The notion of social constructivism was neither the invention of international relations theory nor it developed exclusively within this framework. As Steve Smith shows in a study about the way in which the idea of social construction emerged as an IR approach, there are several significant precursors in sociology and philosophy. For instance, as early as mid 1960s, sociologists Peter Berger, Thomas Luckman and Alfred Schutz used extensively the notion of the social construction of reality, while, outside IR, philosopher John Searle recently revived the debate[7]. In international relations

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[1] In a state-of-the-art article that is often referred to in the discipline, Stephen Walt even portrays constructivism as one of three main directions of IR thinking, alongside (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism: Stephen WALT, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories", *Foreign Policy*, no. 110, 1998, pp. 29-32. For the most controversial critical introduction to this topic, see the special issue of *International Organization* dedicated to the survey of IR thinking fifty years after the establishment of the journal, and from those contributions most notably Peter J. KATZENSTEIN, Robert O. KEOHANE, Stephen KRASNER, "*International Organization* and the Study of World Politics", *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1998, pp. 645-685.

[2] See esp. Ted HOPF, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory", *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp.171-200; Stefano GUZZINI, "A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2000, pp. 147-182; and Maja ZEHFUSS, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

[3] Cf. Maja ZEHFUSS, *Constructivism in International Relations*...cit., pp. 3-5.

[4] See esp. Robert KEOHANE, Joseph NYE, *Transnational Relations and World Politics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1971.

[5] A brief and clear overview of this argument can be found in Nicholas GUILHOT, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and International Order*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 170-174.

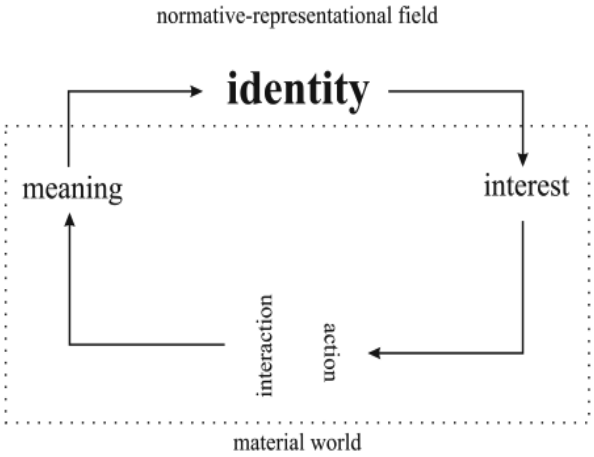
[6] Esp. Ted HOPF, "The Promise of Constructivism...cit.", pp. 173-175.

[7] Steve SMITH, "Foreign Policy is What States Make of It: Social Construction and International Relations Theory", in Vendulka KUBÁLKOVÁ (ed.), *Foreign Policy in A Constructed World*, M.E. Sharpe, New York, 2001, pp. 38-39.

theory, it seems that Nicholas Onuf employed the term and the perspective of social constructivism for the first time in his now often quoted *World of Our Making*[1]. First published in 1989, this book would later be considered the founding manifesto of social constructivism in the discipline[2].

Although the idea of social construction was not an original invention of IR thinking, it brought forward a specific IR puzzle, namely to uncover the way in which "identities are constructed, what norms and practices accompany their reproduction, and how they construct each other"[3]. For constructivists, although the material world exists, it has a meaning. This meaning is socially constructed, develops through social interaction and may be different for different observers[4]. Social interaction generates structures of collective meaning. Through such structures, actors acquire identity, which is the basis for interest formation, which in its turn is the basis for action. Figure 1 below is a visual representation of this mechanism, showing the way the material world can co-exist with the normative-representational field through the continuous processes of meaning, identity and interest formation.

Figure 1
The Constructivist Perspective on Political/Social Reality



In the constructivist logic, identity refers to "mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other"[5]. Unlike in other major approaches, such as neorealism and

[1] Alexander WENDT, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, n. 1; and Maja ZEHFUSS, *Constructivism in International Relations*...cit., p. 10.

[2] Steve SMITH, "New Approaches to International Theory", in John BAYLIS, Steve SMITH (eds.), *Globalization and World Politics*, M.E. Sharpe, New York, 1997, pp. 165-190.

[3] Ted HOPF, "The Promise of Constructivism...cit.", p. 192.

[4] As some constructivists acknowledged, this perspective is heavily influenced by the sociological approach known as symbolic interactionism, cf. Alexander WENDT, *Social Theory*...cit., pp. 170-171.

[5] Ronald JEPPERSON, Alexander WENDT, Peter KATZENSTEIN, "Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security", Peter KATZENSTEIN (ed.), *The Culture of National Security*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, p. 59.

neoliberalism, the images of the "self" may be extended to include the "other". This process of *identification* occurs through cooperation and generates collective identity[1]. Therefore, collective interest is possible due to the formation of a collective identity. In this sense, collective interest is not a mere similarity of self-interests, as neorealists and neoliberals would usually assume, but a different category[2]. The politics of identity is thus "a continual contest for control over the power necessary to produce meaning in a social group"[3]. The fact that difference of meaning is possible across the social group makes change possible but not necessary. Rather the structure of power within that group allows the change. To put it differently, the transformation of collective meanings, and consequently of identities and interests, is in itself a power process that takes place both at material and discursive level. From this perspective, constructivism incorporates the classic Foucauldian power/knowledge nexus[4].

The field of constructivism is still very fluid and it is often difficult to classify within the increasingly large amount scholarship that is labelled or self-labelled as constructivist. However, it is commonly subdivided into two tracks – a conventional and a critical one. The conventional version is closer to mainstream theoretical thinking in the sense that it does not completely reject the epistemological conventions of mainstream social science, such as the principles of sampling, process tracing and the methods of difference[5]. This is why it is usually considered a modern theoretical approach, which relies on the principles of modern science, although it may frequently question many of them[6]. Instead, critical constructivism has a more radical attitude and attempts rather to interpret than to explain social reality[7].

Most strikingly, this methodological difference between the two strands manifests itself in relation with the issue of identity. As Hopf nicely summarized it, "critical theory aims at exploding the myths associated with identity formation, whereas conventional constructivists wish to treat those identities as possible causes of action"[8]. For this reason, conventional constructivism is perceived as attempting to seize a "middle-ground" between classic positivist methodologies and interpretativist/reflectivist/critical/postmodern approaches[9]. In this sense, conventional constructivism may be considered "proper" social constructivism, while critical constructivism may be regarded as a separate tradition of international relations thinking[10].

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[1] Alexander WENDT, *Social Theory*...cit., pp. 318-343.

[2] *Ibidem*, pp. 305-306.

[3] Ted HOPF, "The Promise of Constructivism...cit.", p. 180.

[4] In English, see esp., Michel FOUCAULT, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, transl. by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980.

[5] Mark HOFFMAN, "Restructuring, Reconstruction, Reinscription, Rearticulation: Four Voices in Critical International Theory", *Millenium: Journal of International Studies,* vol. 20, no. 1, 1991, pp. 169-185.

[6] Maja ZEHFUSS, Maja ZEHFUSS, *Constructivism in International Relations*...cit., pp. 1-23.

[7] Richard PRICE, Christian REUS-SMIT, "Dangerous Liaisons?...cit.".

[8] Ted HOPF, "The Promise of Constructivism...cit.", p. 184.

[9] Emanuel ADLER, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics", *European Journal of International Relations*, no. 3, 1997, pp. 319-363; Jeffrey CHECKEL, "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory", *World Politics*, no. 50, 1998, pp. 324-348.

[10] For an interesting discussion of the way in which the notion of social constructivism as a middle ground theory is strategically used for gaining legitimacy within the discipline, see Nalini PESRAM, "Coda: Sovereignty, Subjectivity, Strategy", in Jenny EDKINS, Nalini

However, the methodological distinction is difficult to maintain, even within the work of one author. For instance, Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics*, which is considered the classic work of conventional constructivism, goes beyond the positivist methodology, especially in its last part, when it attempts to question the boundaries of its explanatory model[1]. That is why constructivism may be regarded rather as a continuum in which the questioning of the "natural" character of normal science concepts is a key issue. The more radical the questioning is and the more it departs from the principles of rationalist methodology, the more interpretativist/reflectivist/critical/postmodern that approach is.

Another distinction increasingly popular in the discipline is one operated based on the major focus of research. Conventional constructivists are usually interested in identity issues – its formation, its possible categories and its role in political decision-making. This is what a large part of Alexander Wendt's contributions to the field is about[2] and on this line most constructivist meta-theoretical research advances. Yet, there are authors from within the same conventional camp who are more interested in the question of norms and rules, their influence on human behaviour and their role in social interaction. Friedrich Kratochwil, for instance, urges for a radical reconsideration of norms in international relations given the increasing but so far largely ignored the role that cultural factors would have in political interaction[3]. Similarly, Nicholas Onuf asks questions about the way rethinking the fundaments of international politics from a social constructivist viewpoint might affect international law[4]. This second direction generates much empirical research especially in matters related to human rights and international conflicts.

Irrespective of these division lines, constructivists base their arguments on a series of common assumptions. Most importantly, in opposition with the rest of mainstream research in IR (i.e. neorealism and neoliberalism), constructivism challenges the widespread belief that human (and international) actors, their interest and the conceptual framework in which they evolve are exogenous to social (and international) interaction. In Emanuel Adler's words, constructivism

> "is the view that *the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world*"[5].

This perspective has several consequences. Most importantly, behaviour of human (and political/international) actors is represented as influenced both by material AND inter-subjective factors but the latter are more significant in the process

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PESRAM, Veronique PIN-FAT (eds.), *Sovereignty and Subjectivity*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 1999, pp. 163-175.

[1] Alexander WENDT, *Social Theory*...cit.

[2] Esp. IDEM, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1992, pp. 391-425; IDEM, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State", *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 88, no. 2, 1994, pp. 384-396; and the above referenced *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999).

[3] Yosef LAPID, Friedrich KRATOCHWIL (eds.), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 1996.

[4] Nicholas ONUF, "The Politics of Constructivism", in Karin FIERKE, Knud Erik JØRGENSEN (eds.), *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation*, M.E. Sharpe, New York, 2001, pp. 236-254.

[5] Emanuel ADLER, "Seizing the Middle Ground...cit.", p. 322, emphasis in original.

of interest formation. For that reason, interest is not exogenous to international interaction but it changes with it. From a methodological viewpoint, this means a high sensitivity to context. To put it differently, social and political phenomena could not be meaningfully analysed without understanding the particular circumstances in which they emerged and have developed. Furthermore, both structure and agency matter in social interaction. In fact, they mutually constitute each other. Since individuals give meaning to interaction they are the engine of both structure and agency, and human agency is the most significant factor of social change. Most importantly, although social change is possible, it is not particularly easy or fast. In the next section, I show how this framework can be applied to a reconstruction of regionalism beyond the usual borders of IR theory and how change can be incorporated in this puzzle, using mostly conventional constructivism and its developments on the identity question.

A Constructivist Vocabulary of Regionalism

As I already showed elsewhere, regionalism is a very elusive concept, used across the political science spectrum in almost a dozen of meanings[1]. What all definitions and categories of regionalism have in common is not just the use of "regionalism" to describe a political phenomenon but particularly the reference to a group of elements that (1) are represented as situated in a particular area; and (2) are represented as different from the rest of the neighbouring space. This area is called *region*. Since the act of representation is a mental process, all regions are arbitrary constructs that exist only at conceptual level, irrespective of the reason invoked to justify the differentiation. In other words, "natural" or organically developed regions (i.e. areas distinguished from the rest of the space based on an immutable essence) could not exist, a fact currently accepted throughout social science scholarship[2]. However, the process of differentiation may be (but is not exclusively) related to the increased awareness that, at a certain point in time, certain elements are present in higher quantities in some places and less in others. In this sense, regions are not only notions of space but also of time because they indicate a spatial situation placed in a particular time framework, as well as the spatial dynamics within this framework.

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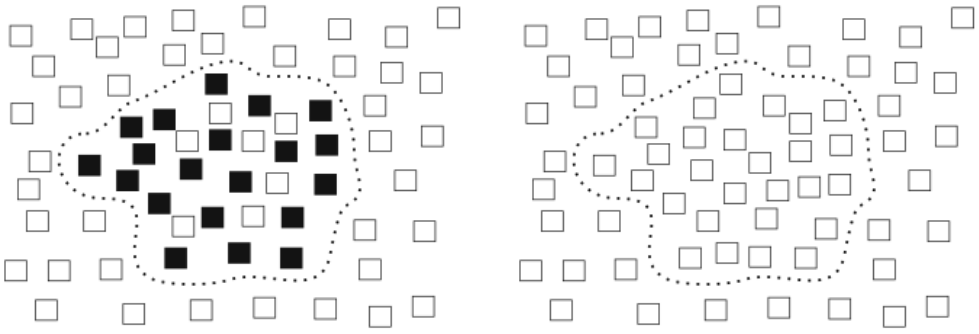
[1] Luciana Alexandra GHICA, "Regionalism at the Margins: East Central European and Black Sea Regional Cooperation Initiatives in Comparative Perspective", in Ruxandra IVAN (ed.), *New Regionalism or No Regionalism? Emerging Regionalism in the Black Sea Area*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2012, pp. 175-204.

[2] The notion of "natural region" seems to have appeared in the geographic literature after the French Revolution, when scholars attempted for the first time to establish the geologic map of France. Later, this concept and the related "natural boundary" have been increasingly used for expressing the idea that some areas would be naturally distinct from the rest of the space, usually on historical, political, economic or social grounds. However, even from the viewpoint of the most empirically inclined research (i.e. geography and history) no such criteria can be convincingly formulated, cf. Gabriel GRANÖ, *Pure Geography*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997; Pierre DEYON, *Régionalismes et régions dans l'Europe des quinze*. Éditions locales de France, Paris, 1997; Paul CLAVAL, *An Introduction to Regional Geography*, transl. by I. Thompson, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1998. Currently, irrespective of the discipline, it is increasingly accepted that regions are no more than fictions, while "natural region" and "natural borders" remain nothing more than rhetoric devices for political purposes.

The fact that, in a given area and at a particular moment, some elements are more frequent than in neighbouring areas is an attribute of space that I will call *regionality*. Within the particular context of this research, regionality refers only to those elements that have relevance for the polity. The embedded distinction between what is relevant and what is irrelevant for the polity expresses a certain hierarchy and relation of power. For these reasons, regionality is a political concept. As long as no one becomes politically aware of certain elements, regionality remains latent and therefore politically irrelevant. In line with constructivist thinking, the elements of regionality are both of material and normative-representational nature. For instance, the amount of foreign investments, the degree of alphabetisation and the rate of criminality are materially measurable elements that may distinguish an area from the rest of its neighbouring space but they are not politically relevant until someone brings certain features forward in the public space. At the same time, such material elements have normative and ideational dimensions. From a normative viewpoint, they are valued for the benefits and the disadvantages they may bring at individual and societal level. At the same time, these value systems are embedded into particular ideational frameworks. Although it is easier to perceive the material instances of regionality, the normative-representational dimension may sometimes be equally visible. For example, religious affiliation of people inhabiting a certain area could be assessed through the material-institutional products of religious practices, as well as through the values and ideational representations that these practices convey.

Figure 2
The Construction of A Region



The act of representing an area as distinct from the rest of the world is a mental process that I call *regionizing*. Since the differentiation is based on certain criteria considered as more appropriate than others, this process creates or expresses the existence of a normative hierarchy, which implicitly conveys a relation of power. Therefore, regionizing is not only a mental process but also a political act. Through regionizing, latent regionality becomes actual. This may be the consequence of an increased awareness of that area's specific regionality.

Figure 2 above illustrates a simplified visual equivalent of regionizing in a world where all possible elements of regionality are represented as squares. In situation A, at a certain time (t_0), an observer considers some of the squares to be black and some white. The fact that, at moment t_0, black squares are perceived as more frequent in a

certain area than in the neighbouring space grants that area the characteristic of actual regionality from the viewpoint of the observer. In this sense, the observer becomes aware of a particular regionality of the area. If the distinction between black squares and white squares is considered relevant, that area is a region for the observer.

Regionizing may not be only the product of increased awareness of specific regionality but also of political projections. For instance, after a combat, a warlord decides that all the land he is able to see from the spot where he defeated his enemy belongs to him. In this way, the latent regionality element "able to belong to someone" that characterises space is transformed into the actual regionality element "belonging to the named warlord". This transformation institutes a region.

This case is illustrated in situation B of Figure 2. Unlike in situation A, the observer does not differentiate between the squares (for simplification, they have been all represented as white) but he distinguishes a certain area from the rest of the space and this distinction is considered politically relevant by the observer. Consequently, that area becomes a region for the observer. In the first case (situation A), latent regionality is transformed into actual regionality on the basis of a certain normative-representational background that makes the observer (1) distinguish between black and white squares; and (2) consider the distinction relevant for the space in which he acts. In the second case (situation B), latent regionality transforms into actual regionality through a political projection.

Since a criterion of political relevance (i.e. relations of power) is necessary for the existence of such a distinction, an already existing normative-representational framework should be also presumed. Therefore, irrespective of the situation, regionizing is generated within certain normative-representational environments. In other words, regions do not exist in epistemological and axiological vacuums. Therefore, regions are not only notions of space and time but also notions of culture. In this sense, distinguishing areas from the rest of the space says as much about those areas' elements of regionality as it says about the values and knowledge background of those that "regionize".

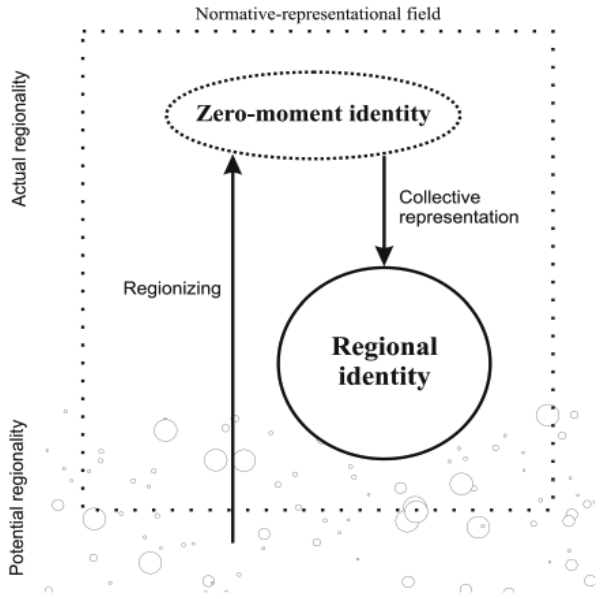
When an area is mentally framed as a region, it is perceived as different from the rest of the space. Beyond the political character of the process, this differentiation institutes a mental borderline between the region and the neighbouring areas. In the previous example, the limits of the region could be those marked with black dots. Once an area is delimited from the rest of the space through the institution of borderlines, as fluid as they may be, that area is conferred a certain identity for the first observer (*zero-moment identity*). This identity becomes *regional identity* when such frame is increasingly shared and a palimpsest of collective representations develops. To put it differently, an area acquires regional identity only when it is increasingly recognized as a region. To use the same illustration as above, the areas delimited by the black dots acquire regional identity only after the representations of their limits circulate and are accepted as relevant by other members of the polity.

From this perspective, regional identity is a characteristic of an area that differentiates it from the neighbouring space. Therefore, regional identity is a normative-representational element of regionality. Regional identity generates thus regionality, and through awareness or political projections, more regionizing. This repeated process may enhance the sense of difference from the rest of the world, which in turn sharpens the sense of regional identity and strengthens a specific regionality.

Figure 3 below shows these relations. First, from the field of potential regionality a region is separated through the process of regionizing. The characteristics of the

region are its borders and an identity (zero-moment identity) expressed through actual regionality. The borders of this region are shifting with each new regionizing but its core remains more or less unchanged. Through the process of collective representation, zero-moment identity generates regional identity. Since it is the expression of a process of differentiation, regional identity is an element of actual regionality. At the same time, once it appears, it may be a potential element of regionality for further regionizing.

Figure 3
Regional Identity Formation



In this context, *regionalism* may be defined as

(1) the belief that politically distinguishing a region from the rest of the world is a desirable means for achieving certain purposes;

(2) any action that makes such distinctions; or

(3) the political results of such actions or beliefs.

The first meaning of the term expresses the idea that regionalism may be an ideology. In the second sense, regionalism is a project or a process, while the third meaning refers to regionalism as a product. In order to avoid terminological confusions, *regionalization* should therefore refer only to the spread of regionalism as product. In this sense, the difference between the two concepts is that regionalism always expresses an intentional element, while regionalization is the result of regionalism. Consequently, regionalization is a phenomenon, while regionalism is not. Similarly, the spread or increased preference for regionalism as ideology is also a phenomenon, which may be referred to as *ideological regionalization* to distinguish it from the spread of regionalism as product. Finally, when the intensification of regionalization is accompanied by significant changes in the nature of regionalism, one could talk about a new *wave of regionalism*.

Figure 4
The Field of Regionalism

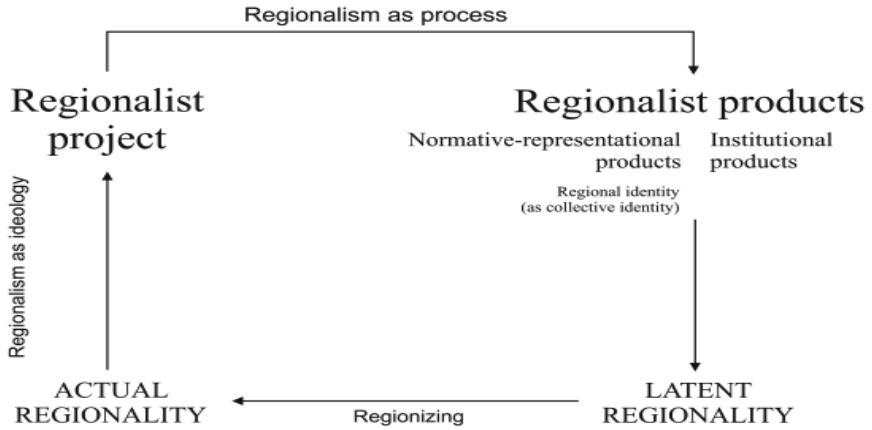


Figure 4 above proposes a visual representation of the relations between concepts within the field of regionalism. Each of the four states of regionalism (i.e. project, process, product, ideology) has an institutional dimension, as well as a normative-representational one. As project, process or product, regionalism creates or relies upon certain political institutions. For instance, a regional security arrangement is an institutional product. However, it conveys certain norms, values and ideas related to what security represents and how it can be achieved. Such norms, values and ideas are embedded into the "project of regional security arrangement", as well as into the process through which the particular arrangement was created. At the same time, with the creation of this institutional product a certain collective identity emerges, through the process of collective representation of the region. This collective identity is a regional identity. In this sense, regions are normative-representational products of regionalism, whilst regional arrangements, for instance, are institutional products. Not least, regionalist ideologies, which belong to the normative field, produce institutions of regionalism, particularly through the generation of regionalist projects. In short, all institutions of regionalism have and create representational, ideational and normative elements, which, through political will, may generate more institutions.

The easiest way to observe the instances of regionalism is at the level of institutional products. In a previous work[1], I identified nine different major versions of contemporary regionalism, from both academic and policy debates. These are preferential trade arrangements, regional intergovernmental cooperation, cross-border cooperation, bottom-up increase of autonomy, top-down increase of autonomy, regional separatism, administrative division of territories, soft integration, and political integration. However, if one takes into account the normative background (or, in the vocabulary developed in this paper, the ideological project) embedded within each of the different variants of regionalism, the nine versions could be grouped into only four categories. First, regionalism may express the view that the international actions of governments can produce certain desirable effects within the international arena

[1] Luciana Alexandra GHICA, "Regionalism at the Margins...cit.".

and within the borders of nation-states. Preferential trade arrangements and regional intergovernmental cooperation are based on this vision. They could then form one category, which could be referred to as *regional intergovernmental cooperation*. Second, regionalism may also be a product of the idea that, by increasing the exchanges in areas close to the borders of nation-states, both the local and the national community can benefit. This category includes only the instances of regional trans-border cooperation. Accordingly, a potential label for this political phenomenon is *trans-border regionalism*. Third, regionalist products could also be generated based on the view that certain autonomy is necessary at local level for the (more) efficient functioning of the polity. This is the case of the "increase of regional autonomy" and the "administrative division of the national territory" variants of regionalism. All of them could be grouped within the *autonomy regionalism* category. Finally, *regional separatism* is a category in itself. It refers to the initiatives that intend to produce political territories (quasi) independent from the existent nation-states, based on a regional specificity. Such initiatives may be the result of failed autonomies, like in the case of Kosovo and more recently South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Catalonia. However, irrespective of the degrees and functioning of autonomy, regional separatism is mostly characterised by the existence of a political elite that challenges the established order within a community claiming that regional specificity should produce political territories (quasi) independent from the political establishment of that community.

Table 1
Categories of Contemporary Regionalism and their Normative Background

CATEGORIES OF REGIONALISM	NORMATIVE BACKGROUND	VARIANT OF REGIONALISM
Regional intergovernmental cooperation	Internationals action of governments can produce certain desirable effects within the international arena and consequently within the borders of nation-states	*Regional political intergovernmental cooperation* *Regional trade agreements*
Trans-border regionalism	Through the increase of the exchanges in areas close to the borders of nation-states, both the local and the national community can benefit	*Cross-border cooperation*
Autonomy regionalism	Autonomy is necessary at the local level because it makes the polity function more efficiently	*Bottom-up increase of autonomy* *Top-down increase of autonomy* *Administrative division of territory*
Regional separatism	Regional specificity should produce political territories (quasi) independent from the existent nation-states	*Regional separatism*

Table 1 above summarizes the normative background of these four categories, which are based on the possible products of regionalism. They are full categories,

which means that they have exist in all the possible forms of regionalism identified at the beginning of this section (i.e. ideology/normative background, project, process, product).

However, when compared to the inventory of regionalism variants identified within current scholarship that I have previously identified[1], one may notice that this typology excludes the frequently treated cases of soft integration and political integration. They might indeed group into a fifth category, *regional integration*, which would expresses the idea that a complex social and political process of interdependence creation takes place within a certain area and this process would make that area politically different from the neighbouring space in an almost irreversible way. Yet, unlike the other four types of regionalism, which can be identified through specific institutional products and ideologies, integration (as interdependence) cannot be observed but only postulated. What one can observe in terms of products is an increase of activity and interaction in a certain area at a given time, viz. an *intensification of regionality*. One may also observe that sometimes an increase of regionality in one field is more frequently correlated with an increase (or decrease) of regionality in another field. Nonetheless, this does not prove the existence of any interdependence but shows only certain co-variation. In time, through repeated observations, this may generate the idea that such co-variation appears in a particular set of circumstances.

The existence of such co-variation, at least at conceptual level, has favoured the emergence of governmental strategies aiming at creating integration. However, the link between such strategies and the intensification of regionality is neither necessary nor irrefutable. At most, one may argue that, as a regionalist political project, integration may generate an institutional framework. Whether this framework is essentially different from other institutional frameworks of political interaction has been subject of debate for several generations of regionalism scholarship. Until now, no interpretation gained primacy, despite the relatively recent resurgence of regional integration studies[2].

This is the reason for which, unlike in the case of the other four categories of regionalism, one could not identify a specific institutional product of the project of regional integration. In short, regional integration is an incomplete category of regionalism. Therefore, integration could be meaningfully used only to refer to those strategies deliberately aiming at increasing interdependence within an area. As argued above, interdependence could not be but postulated. In other words, integration is solely an ideology. Furthermore, either as a political strategy, or as increase of regionality, it may be manifested within all the previous four categories of regionalism. For these reasons, regional integration should not be considered a separate category of regionalism.

Apart from this classification, another way of looking to regionalism is the relation it has with the regions it creates. Regions institute within the polity an alternative spatial division to the dominant order. Currently, this order is described particularly through the concept and institutions of the nation-state. For this reason, one could differentiate among the types of regions and regionalism based on the relations

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[1] *Ibidem*.

[2] For comprehensive reviews of these debates, see Ben ROSAMOND, *Theories of European integration*, Palgrave, New York, 2000; and Antje WIENER, Thomas DIEZ (eds.) *European integration theory*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009.

between the borders of regions and the borders of nation states. Accordingly, there are regional phenomena manifested only within the administrative territory of nation-states. This is *domestic* regionalism, while the area within the borders of a nation-state where it manifests is a *domestic region*. Second, there are regionalist arrangements, such as cross-border cooperation, which transcend the frontiers of nation-states but do not include states as a whole. *Trans-border* could be a good descriptor for this type of regions, as well as for the respective variants of regionalism. Finally, there is regional interaction that takes place only among national governments and consequently refers to the entire territory of the states involved. This may be referred to as *international regionalism*.

Table 2 below presents the variants of regionalism in relation with the type of regions. Accordingly, five possible instances of regionalism could be obtained. First, regional intergovernmental cooperation takes place exclusively at international level and is the only type of regionalism that develops at this level. For this reason, regional intergovernmental cooperation is equivalent to international regionalism. Second, regional transnational cooperation, such as cross-border arrangements, takes place within trans-border regions and thus is an instance of trans-border regionalism. Third, the processes of increase of autonomy of sub-national units are by definition confined to domestic regions. Finally, regional separatism is mainly domestic, as it usually pursues the independence of territories included within a certain nation-state. However, there are cases, such as the Basque Country, where separatism demands include territories of neighbouring countries. In this case, regional separatism can be a case of trans-border regionalism.

Table 2
The Boundaries of Regionalism

VARIANTS OF CONTEMPORARY REGIONALISM	REGION		
	Domestic	*Trans-border*	*International*
Regional intergovernmental cooperation	-	-	X
Trans-border regionalism	-	X	-
Autonomy regionalism	X	-	-
Regional separatism	X	X	-

Not least, irrespective of these three dimensions, regionalism is also a political project that conveys a particular interest. Interests are coagulated politically from the society through political elites, that is through those elites that voice claims related to the polity and are able or intend to govern. Within the community described through the institutions of the nation-state, which is the political framework in which most people live currently, four types of political elites can be differentiated according to the level of political legitimacy and decision-making. First, there are political elites designated to act for the defence and development of public goods at national level. These may be referred to as *central authorities*. They represent the community-wide interests and normally have a community-wide legitimacy. The political parties elected in the national Parliament and those that form the national government are

illustrations of this type. Second, there are political elites designated to act for the public interest at the local level. These may be referred to as *local authorities*. Local governments, local Parliaments, city councils and mayors are examples of this second type. Third, there are political elites that that express private interests but attempt to represent the entire community, without having a community mandate for that. These are *challengers*. Political parties that are not represented in the national Parliaments and certain illegal political movements, as long as they have nation-wide claims, are illustrations of this type. Finally, political elites that express private interests but attempt to represent the community at local level, such as the separatist movements, are a fourth type and may be referred to as *local contenders*.

The first two types represent the public interest through mechanisms of representation accepted throughout the entire community. Consequently, these political elites govern usually within the established order of the polity. In contrast, the last two types of political elites speak in the name of the society without having been appointed to do so through mechanisms of representations publicly accepted/ acknowledged. These political elites want to govern but not necessarily within the established order of the polity. There might be cases, for instance, in which local authorities express the view of local contenders and even act in line with the logic of local contenders. This may happen in areas where national minorities are in majority and where local contenders usually demand for higher autonomy or regional separatism.

In my view, all four types of political elites may interact and influence each other, transferring values and even worldviews to one another. In fact, belonging to one elite or another is a feature provided rather by the context than by the essence of participants. In this sense, the distinction between the four types expresses nothing more than the legitimacy that political elites may have within the main system of political interaction acknowledged by the community in which they act. To illustrate more sharply this distinction, I use Karl Mannheim's terminology and refer to the two main opposing political legitimacies ideological and utopian respectively[1]. Accordingly, the first two types of political elites have an ideological legitimacy, while the last two types have a utopian one.

Table 3
Political Elites and the Representation of Interest

LEVEL OF INTEREST REPRESENTATION	POLITICAL LEGITIMACY	
	Ideological	***Utopian***
Community wide	Central authorities	Challenger
Local	Local authorities	Local contender

Regionalism involves different types of elites. Local contenders are most likely to be involved in regionalist projects, as their goals are strongly related to certain representation of regions and the relation between regions and the institutions of the nation state. Due to their legitimacy, ideological elites also have an important role

[1] Karl MANNHEIM, *Ideology and Utopia: Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, transl. by L. Wirth and E. Shils, Harcourt Brace, San Diego, 1936.

in the development of regionalism, particularly in those instances that are accepted as legitimate throughout the polity. In contrast, challengers are the least likely to be involved in regionalist processes as their goal is to acquire power over the entire community. For this type of elites, regionalism is only of secondary importance. Finally, in each of the four types of regionalism it is more likely that certain types of elites are more often involved than others. First, by definition, regional intergovernmental cooperation brings together those political elites designated to act for the defence and development of public goods at national level in international interactions. Therefore, central authorities are the main actor when it comes to this type of regionalism. Some arrangements can be, however, contested by challengers, or can involve the participation of some local governmental elites. Second, trans-border regionalism usually involves the collaboration of local authorities from areas close to national borders. Yet, for legal reasons, such cooperation also requires a constant dialogue with the central governmental elites. Third, autonomy regionalism is a process through which ideological elites, sometimes contested by local contenders, administrate the national territory. Lastly, in regional separatism, by definition, local contenders challenge the existent communitarian narrative of the polity both at local and at the community-wide level. Therefore, it is commonly a triangular process involving the ideological elites and the local contenders, though sometimes challengers may add to the equation. Table 4 below summarizes these relations.

Table 4
Regionalism and the Representation of Interest

VARIANTS OF CONTEMPORARY REGIONALISM	INTEREST REPRESENTATION	
	Major actors	***Minor or other potential actors***
Regional intergovernmental cooperation	Central authorities	Challengers Local authorities
Trans-border regionalism	Ideological elites	Local contenders
Autonomy regionalism	Ideological elites	Local contenders
Regional separatism	Local contenders Ideological elites	Challengers

Introducing Regional Cohesiveness

In the previous section, I made the distinction between regionalism as product and regionalism as project, arguing that regionalism as product is the result of particular political strategies that, like the projects from which they emerged, are informed by particular ideologies. In this sense, various forms of regionalism can be differentiated based on a specific normative background that produces particular forms of regionalist products. I also argued that integration is an ideology that can be transformed into a regionalist project but not into a regionalist product. This happens because integration as a product can be only postulated but not demonstrated. For this reason, regional integration is not a distinctive variant of regionalism.

The (regional) integration paradigm has the advantage that could offer an easily to grasp perspective about the way in which certain areas develop and remain politically distinct from others. To put it differently, integration has provided a narrative not only about the process but also about the products of regionalism. If this paradigm is abandoned due to the impossibility to falsify it, an alternative is required.

A less normative way to assess political reality at regional level than through the integration paradigm might be through the concept of regionality. Since regionality refers to the fact that in a particular space some elements are more frequent than in neighbouring areas, the increase or decrease of regionality is an indicator for the way in which the political distinctiveness of that space fluctuates. However, like the usual proxies for integration, this indicator refers to the way in which reality is perceived but not to the political process through which regional products acquire certain stability over time. Therefore, the concept of regionality is not enough to generate a narrative about the degree of stability that a regional product has during a certain period or about the changes that may occur in this respect.

As a possible solution for this problem, I propose the concept of *regional cohesiveness*, which I define as the *degree to which* a *group of actors inhabiting a limited contiguous space act and represent themselves as a group*. Two different dimensions may be identified within this definition. First, regional cohesiveness refers to actions occurring within the material world. For instance, the signature of an agreement, the adoption of a common declaration on a particular issue or the imposition of an economic embargo on a third party are actions that happen in the material world and produce physically distinguishable results such as written texts or the sudden stop of trade relations. Since I share the view that interactions within the material world take place within the framework of certain institutions[1], I call this dimension institutional. Second, as already argued in the previous section, the representation of a group as distinct is a normative-representational act. At the same time, the fact that some actors act as a group generates particular representations of the respective actors and of the group they thus form. For this reason, the concept of regional cohesiveness has also a discursive dimension.

From its design, regional cohesiveness is an output oriented concept. In other words, it does not refer to the process but to the products of political interaction. In the particular case of international regionalism, for instance, it refers to the institutional and to the normative-representational products of international regionalism as project and process.

Following the constructivist logic briefly sketched at the beginning of this article, as well as the strata of meaning production framework that I briefly outlined elsewhere[2],

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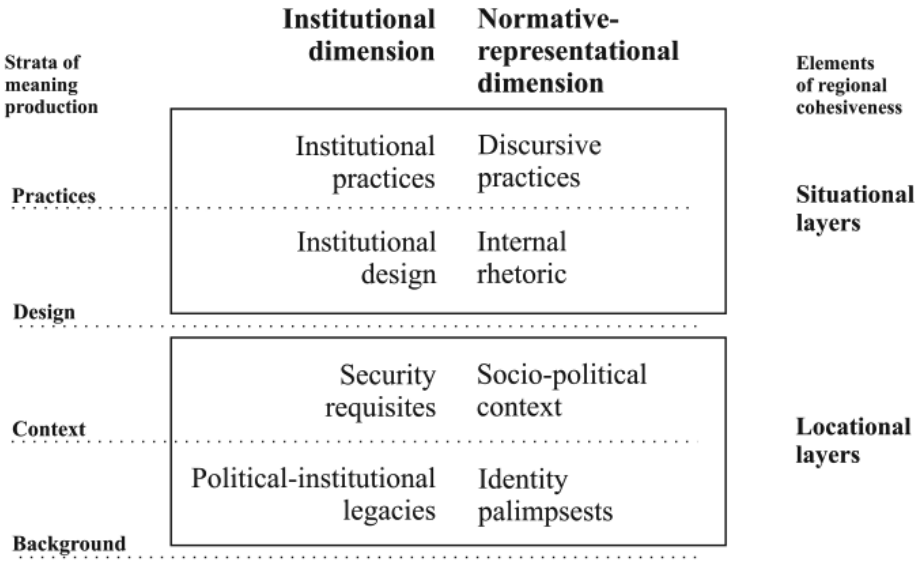
[1] For detailed discussions of this argument, see esp. James G MARCH, Johan P. OLSEN, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 78, no. 3, 1984, pp. 734-749; James G MARCH, Johan P. OLSEN, "The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders", *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1998, pp. 943-969; Johan P. OLSEN, "Garbage Cans, New Institutionalism, and the Study of Politics", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 95, no. 1, 2001, pp. 191-198; and Peter HALL, Rosemary C.R. TAYLOR, "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms", *Political Studies*, vol. 44, no. 5, 1996, pp. 936-957.

[2] Luciana Alexandra GHICA, "Discourse Analysis and the Production of Meaning in International Relations: A Brief Methodological Outline", *Analele Universității din București. Științe Politice*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2013, pp. 3-9.

these products can be also assessed on two dimensions – material (institutional) and normative-representational. First, one may observe the particular institutional and discursive design that is instituted through regionalism. To use the same example of intergovernmental arrangements, this means that, institutionally, international regionalism creates certain structures that allow the interaction of the group within the particular framework of a regional initiative. For instance, regional intergovernmental initiatives develop through meetings of the heads of state and government, as well as through the work of more technical bodies such as the secretariats of these initiatives. I will refer to this institutional dimension as *institutional design*. On the discursive dimension, there is a particular way in which the group represents itself internally and this draws the boundary between the respective group and the rest of the world. In the case of international regionalism, this may be assessed from the official documents of the respective regional grouping. I will refer to this discursive dimension as *internal rhetoric*. The second level on which the products can be assessed is that of institutional and discursive practices. *Institutional practices* refer to the way in which the goals, objectives and programs of the regional grouping are implemented (i.e. activities). Discursive practices (or *external rhetoric*) refer to the way in which the group presents itself to the world. These four aspects (institutional design, discursive design/internal rhetoric, institutional practices, discursive practices/external rhetoric) may be referred to as *situational layers* because they describe the specifics of a regional group, thus helping situating them in relation with other groups. In figure 5 below, these layers of strata of meaning production are illustrated in the upper part.

Figure 5
Dimensions and Elements of Regional Cohesiveness



Although it is a product-oriented concept, regional cohesiveness has also a dynamic dimension. It emerges in a particular context that is the result of interaction between human actors, their interest and the conceptual framework in

which they evolve. Since all these develop in time, the products of regionalism could not be (meaning)fully understood outside their context. This context refers mostly to the particular political circumstances that led to the emergence of regionalism. Such circumstances refer to the specific *(in)security requisites* that urged the creation of the regional arrangements, as well as to the larger *socio-political context* in which the political phenomenon of regionalism develops. More specifically, the first type of circumstances (i.e. security requisites) constitutes the institutional dimension of a context stratum of meaning production, while the second type (i.e. socio-political context) corresponds to its normative-representational dimension. Not least, in line with constructivist thinking, I represent regional cohesiveness as developing on a certain discursive and institutional background. In other words, regional cohesiveness is not a mere measurement of a political object "thrown in time" but it assesses the consistency of a regional group in a *longue durée* perspective. Consequently, regionalism as a political phenomenon cannot be meaningfully studied separately from its particular environment (i.e. historical and political context). This background also has an institutional dimension (*political and institutional legacies*) and a normative-representational one (*identity palimpsests*). These four aspects (security requisites, socio-political context, political and institutional legacies and the identity palimpsests) may be referred to as *locational* layers because they help establishing the specific political, socio-historical and identity location of a regional grouping within the larger universe of political and social phenomena. Figure 5 above summarizes all these aspects of regional cohesiveness and places them in relation with the strata of meaning production framework in the lower part of the illustration.

The concept of regional cohesiveness has several advantages in front of its rival paradigms. First, unlike the concepts of integration or interdependence, it is falsifiable. When a group of actors does not act or represent itself as group, then there is no cohesiveness. For this reason, the concept may be regarded as more suitable to analytical purposes than those of interdependence and integration, especially for research on regionalist products. Second, regional cohesiveness is a concept that may be applicable to all categories of regionalism. Since it describes the way in which certain areas develop and remain distinct from others in terms of political action, regional cohesiveness is a general category applicable to all cases in which regions are created. This means that, despite their specificities, for instance regional separatism and international regionalism could benefit from a common analysis tool, for instance, which could help foster the dialogue across various subdisciplines or research areas that tackle the issue of regionalism. For this reason, regional cohesiveness is mostly a political science concept and not only one limited to the study of international relations, as most examples used so far suggested.

Within the particular field of IR, regional cohesiveness helps accommodating social constructivism to international regionalism. The most significant attempts to import constructivist elements to international regionalism so far have been those developed through the New Regional Approach/Theory (NRA/T) agenda, particularly in the version developed by Björn Hettne within the framework of the regionalist studies developed at the United Nations University. From this partially (neo)Marxian, partially (neo)liberal perspective, international regionalism is a product of the tension between global and regional tendencies, between an inextricable global interdependence and

the need to cope with particular local issues[1]. In this sense, regionalism is a multilevel and multidimensional phenomenon that often transcends national borders[2]. Yet, the agenda of this type of research is largely critical, aiming to uncover inequalities and the mechanisms of power relations in an increasingly complex world where states are no longer the unique actor[3] but are not particularly sensitive to the question of identity dynamics. From this perspective, one may rather argue that the NRA/T is a means of accommodating rather critical theories than the larger constructivist framework to international regionalism. The concept of regional cohesiveness that I propose does not aim to have a critical agenda. At the same time, due to the way in which it was defined, regional cohesiveness is openly a social (conventional) constructivist concept. Within the current scholarly context, it offers therefore the most consistent conceptual tool that brings social (conventional) constructivism more consistently into the international regionalism debates.

Interestingly, although it was developed to address a conceptual shortcoming of regional integration, regional cohesiveness may be also congruent with the integration paradigm in its various forms. For instance, for "hardcore" functionalism and the NRA/T, the fact that a group is cohesive, a phenomenon/output that could be assessed through the regional cohesiveness framework, may be represented as the result of certain types of interdependence. From such perspectives, regional cohesiveness is a proxy for integration. The liberal paradigm can also incorporate this concept and even much easier than functionalism. Instead of using the notion of integration that was developed from the functionalist logic and with the particular case of the European Community in mind, liberalism (especially in the liberal intergovernmentalist form) could opt for this more neutral concept, which is not infiltrated by an ideological perspective of interdependency. In this sense, the concept of regional cohesiveness and the perspective in which is embedded are close not only to social constructivism but also to (neo)liberalism and institutionalism.

In meta-narrative terms and to use the very framework set in this paper, what the future of regional cohesiveness will be within the scholarly community will depend on the collective representations of the concept of integration, as well as on various institutional structural and contextual factors, beyond the reach of one single individual. Since (regional) integration has already a very long academic history and if I were to take as proxy the meta-conceptual comparison that a colleague reflecting on a previous version of this study made between the regional cohesiveness/regional integration puzzle that I framed and Robert Dahl's proposal of polyarchy as a more appropriate tool for referring to democracy[4], then it is probably more likely that the concept of regional cohesiveness or any other similar proposal will be rather adapted

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[1] Björn HETTNE, András INOTAI, Osvaldo SUNKEL (eds.) *Globalism and the New Regionalism*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999; Björn HETTNE, "Beyond the 'New Regionalism'", *New Political Economy*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2005, pp. 543-571.

[2] Björn HETTNE, "The New Regionalism Revisited", in Frederik SÖDERBAUM, Timothy M.SHAW (eds.) *Theories of New Regionalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2003, pp. 22-42.

[3] Björn HETTNE, "Globalization and the New Regionalism: The Second Great Transformation", in Björn HETTNE, András INOTAI, Osvaldo SUNKEL (eds.) *Globalism*...cit., pp. 1-24.

[4] I thank Andrés Malamoud for first pointing out this meta-conceptual similarity, as well as the other participants in the seminar on regionalism organized at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon (21-22 October 2010) for their comments and

to the integration paradigm than completely replacing the (regional) integration paradigm. This is a fact which by itself can move us beyond the current conceptual cul-de-sac in which we sometimes find ourselves when researching upon regionalism or (regional) integration phenomena.

suggestions on a previous version of this study which is a revised and extended part of the author's doctoral thesis.